



# TARGET ACCESS



## USDA in Forefront of Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities

TARGET Access

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The tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, forced the entire country to focus on emergency preparedness. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), however, had already begun working on updating its procedures. USDA leaders organized the agency's emergency plans around the Forest Service's mature crisis action procedures, the Incident Command System (ICS). USDA began modifying its Occupants Emergency Plans to incorporate the principles of ICS and to better meet the needs of employees with disabilities. Today, the USDA is a leader in the federal sector in regard to emergency preparedness for people with disabilities.

In 1993, a fire alarm incident at the USDA South Building led to numerous complaints by employees with disabilities as to inadequate notification and evacuation procedures. In response, the USDA set up a task force that implemented several solutions aimed at assisting people with disabilities in the emergency response process. The Warden Phone System (WPS) was implemented to improve emergency communications between employees with mobility impairments and the USDA Emergency Command Center. The WPS phones are next to each bank of elevators, distinguishable by their red color, and were recently upgraded to twenty-four hour

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USDA in Forefront continued...

per day on-call status. Hearing-Impaired Pager System (HIPS) devices were distributed to provide a direct way of informing deaf and hard of hearing employees of emergencies via a vibrating feature. Finally, a clean hall policy was initiated, which helped keep USDA hallways free of general obstructions at all times.

Over the next 10 years, tragic events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and the Sept. 11 attacks heightened awareness of the need for emergency preparedness. The anthrax incidents in the nation's capital also raised awareness that emergency procedures needed to address alternatives to evacuation and to consider Shelter-in-Place options. Subsequent improvements in technology allowed the USDA to expand and improve notification and communication systems. Considering all the possible threats, the USDA needed a system that would not only alert employees of the emergency but also provide instructions on how to react.

Among the improvements added to the emergency procedures was a computer-based notification system known as CENS or the Computer Emergency Notification System. Employees are now able to receive emergency alerts right on their desktop. This information is in the form of accessible HTML and is also Section 508 compliant. Further honing of this technology will allow messages to be sent from the Operations Center to select buildings. In 2003, a public address speaker system was installed in the USDA Headquarters Complex Buildings in Washington, D.C., which allowed messages to be transmitted throughout all of the buildings simultaneously or individually. Flashing lights alert personnel in the deaf and hard of hearing community that the system is in use. Last year, the USDA joined the Roam Secure Alert Network to provide a capability to deliver emergency information quickly in text format through e-mail, telephone, pager and wireless PDA service. Additionally, USDA acquired the capability to use its internal television system to provide emergency information.

USDA emergency procedures include detailed after action sessions which examine every aspect of the response to a crisis or drill. The results are shared with building

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## Five Things You Can Do Now To Be Prepared

### 1) Prepare a Grab-n-Go Kit.

<http://www.usda.gov/oo/beprepared/Grabandgokit.htm>

### 2) Research alternate routes from your workplace to your home.

### 3) Know what to do in the event of an evacuation.

<http://www.usda.gov/oo/beprepared/OEPplans.htm>

### 4) Know your Shelter-in-Place procedures.

<http://www.hqnet.usda.gov/siplocations.htm>

### 5) Be aware of available notification systems.

<http://www.usda.gov/oo/beprepared/communication.htm>



Forefront continued...

occupants. Following every emergency event or drill, the Incident Management Team issues a follow-up e-mail explaining the incident and asking for feedback from all employees. Initially, people with disabilities had some complaints, but now the Incident Management Team states that almost no problems are being reported. Nonetheless, Incident Management Team member and TARGET Center Director, Bruce McFarlane, says, "Despite our position as a leader in emergency preparedness for people with disabilities, the USDA is still trying to constantly improve our system." In fact, McFarlane told TARGET Access that the USDA intends to create an employee task force for four separate disability groups that can meet with the emergency planners and maintain a dialogue about various topics involving emergency preparedness and people with disabilities.

The multifaceted modes of notification are beneficial to all employees, not just those with disabilities. Redundant systems utilizing visual and audible alerts ensure that all employees are notified of emergency situations and how to respond. Equally important is that all USDA employees are now aware of the procedures and policies related to emergency preparedness.

## **In The News: Emergency Preparedness & Disability**

In July 2004, President Bush issued an executive order, in regard to emergency preparedness for individuals with disabilities, to ensure that the federal government appropriately supports safety and security for individuals with disabilities in situations involving disasters including earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, hurricanes and acts of terrorism.

Agencies are to:

- Consider, in their emergency preparedness planning, the unique needs of agency employees with disabilities and individuals with disabilities whom the agency serves;
- Encourage, including through the provision of technical assistance, as appropriate, consideration of the unique needs of employees and individuals with disabilities served by state, local and tribal governments and private organizations and individuals in emergency preparedness planning; and
- Facilitate cooperation among federal, state, local and tribal governments and private organizations and individuals in the implementation of emergency preparedness plans as they relate to individuals with disabilities.

For the first time, in December 2004, a court declared that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) require places of public accommodation to consider the needs of people with disabilities in developing emergency evacuation plans. This means that all private entities subject to the ADA throughout the country, including landlords, must now seek to accommodate people with disabilities in the development and modification of emergency evacuation procedures.

"This is a significant decision that should greatly enhance the safety of persons with disabilities in the post-September 11th world," said Elaine Gardner, director of the Disability Rights Project at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. "The ADA always has been understood to help get people with disabilities into places of public accommodation. Now, for the first time, it also has been found to require that public places try to get those same people out in the event of a fire, terrorist attack or other emergency."



## Join APDA Today!

The Association for Persons with Disabilities in Agriculture (APDA) is an employee association celebrating diversity within USDA.

Regular monthly meetings are open to everyone who wants to broaden their horizons, break down attitudinal barriers, and build relationships based on positive experiences, including employees with disabilities, their supervisors, managers, co-workers, and family members, and advocates for persons with disabilities.

Meetings are held on the last Wednesday of the month in the back of the South Building cafeteria or other locations as announced starting at 11:30 a.m.

You don't have to have a disability to participate in APDA activities.

All USDA employees are welcome to attend.

For more information, visit [www.apda.usda.gov](http://www.apda.usda.gov).

# TARGET Center Training Schedule

The following training classes take place monthly in the TARGET Center. The dates listed in *italics* are the next two available sessions for each course. Please contact the course instructor to reserve a spot and to request a sign-language interpreter, alternative formatting or other necessary accommodations.

## Workstation Ergonomics

*March 2nd or April 6th, 12 pm - 1 pm*

Instructor: [David Kay](#), 202-720-2600

Don't wait until your wrists hurt or your neck aches! Prevent the injuries before they occur. What are the causes of repetitive strain injuries (like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome) and how can you reduce the risks of these injuries? Learn this and more at TARGET's ergonomic training session.

## Making Accessible PDFs

*April 13th or May 11th, 12 pm - 1 pm*

Instructor: [Paul Lloyd](#), 202-720-2600

Create accessible, Section 508 compliant PDF files with Adobe 6.0 from MS Word, forms, and other file formats. Listen to a screen reader read an accessible PDF in this training class.

## Customizing Your PC

*February 16 or March 16, 12 pm - 1 pm*

Instructor: [David Kay](#), 202-720-2600

Learn how to personalize your PC settings in this TARGET class! Change the colors and font sizes of your desktop and Internet browser. Take full advantage of the tools already on your computer.

*Please visit our web site for more information and a complete listing of disability related events.*



*Helping People. It's What We Do.*

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